
Struggle for Environmental Justice: Comparing Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani Historical Site and Dakota Pipeline Project

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Abstract

The article discusses and analyses the challenges faced by the autochthonous populations like Georgians and Native Americans in the fight for their natural resources. The article provides a comparative analysis on how Georgian and Native American nations had to struggle to protect their environment.

In 2004, an important archaeological discovery was made by the German and Georgian scientists on the Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani hill, located at the territory of the Bolnisi Municipality, Georgia. Later, the Georgian and foreign media outlets started discussing the world-wide scale and uniqueness of the pre-historic mine.

In 2013, the status of the Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani, as a cultural monument was deprived and the mining company “RMG Gold” got a permission to extract gold in the wider area where Sakdrisi was located, which caused protests from academics and preservationists.

Similar challenge was faced by Native Americans (in the U.S.) in 2016 (the problem lasted till 2020), when protests started around the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota (U.S.). The pipeline was supposed to run from the Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota to southern Illinois, crossing beneath the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, as well as under part of Lake Oahe near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

Key words: Environmental protection, pipeline, reservation

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Introduction

In 2004, German and Georgian scientists made an important archaeological discovery on the Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani hill, located at the territory of Bolnisi Municipality, the site was dated to the third millennium BC, excavations began in 2006. Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani has been recognized to be the oldest pre-historic gold mine in the world with stone hammers and antler picks used to extract the ore. It was initially given the status of cultural heritage site, but this was revoked by the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection in 2013.

The Sakdrisi Gold Mine had been one of the Georgia's most debatable issues since the Government approved private gold mining company RMG Gold to resume mining at the controversial site.

On December, 2014 the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia and the National Agency of Cultural Heritage Protection approved RMG Gold's request to resume mining at the site. Some experts believed, that Sakdrisi Gold Mine was one of the oldest gold mines in the world, dating back almost 5,000 years.

The challenges of achieving environmental protection have been faced by Georgian people in recent years as well. During the protests against the Construction of Mestiachala HPP in 2018 and Namakhvani HPP in 2021, protesters were strongly opposing the construction of hydro power plants.

Similar to Georgians, Native Americans (known as Indians, indigenous peoples in the U.S.) as autochthonous populations faced a challenge in terms of the fight for their natural resources. The dispute started in 2016, when Native Americans in North Dakota protested the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline, stating that the pipeline would cross the Missouri river (the main source of drinking water of the Native Americans) and pass close to the tribal reservation (White, 2018). This dispute started during Barack Obama Administration, as the protest erupted among environmentalists and landowners, Obama administration stopped the construction of the pipeline until the environmental review. However, the decision was changed with the election of Donald Trump in 2017, whose administration signed an executive order and approved the Dakota Access Pipeline (Hudetz, 2016).

Case of Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani gold mine

In 2014 an archaeological site in southern Georgia was destroyed by the Russian mining company RMG Gold.

According to the Professor Thomas Stöllner from the University of Bochum (Germany), who was conducting archeological research in Sakdrisi, ancient Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani site was belonged not only to Georgia, but to the whole continent of Eurasia. Many scientists from Georgia (National Museum of Georgia), Germany (German Mining Museum, University of Bochum, University of Frank-

furt (CEZ Mannheim), France (CNRS), United States of America (University of California) and Great Britain (University of Cambridge) had been working on the Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani problem for 10 years. It had been possessing the status of cultural monument for seven years, since Thomas Stöllner together with Georgian archeologists had discovered “Colchian Eldorado”.

As Stöllner stated, “according to the results of research conducted since 2004, there is no longer any doubt that Sakdrisi is one of the most important archaeological monuments of Georgia; it provides the oldest evidence of gold mining and processing in the whole Caucasus. Its origin dates back to IV BC. Prehistoric mining continues in III BC. What made the Sakdrisi so unique was that all the characteristic aspects of the gold-mining-producing community of that time had been fully preserved there” (Mujiri, 2019).

However, in 2013 due to the decision made by the Ministry of Culture of Georgia, status of Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani as a cultural monument was abolished.

During the summer and autumn of 2013, the conflict over Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani made the news in Georgia; environmentalists became actively involved in this process. The activists started demonstrations in Tbilisi and later hold in a protest camp at Sakdrisi.

Despite this, the problem was not solved. In spring of 2014, there was an increased pressure from the environmentalists and from people abroad and the campaign to save Sakdrisi became more intense. Georgian government created a commission, consisting of two foreign scientists – one mining archaeologist and one geologist – who concluded that there really was an important archaeological material.

On December 12, 2014 Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani site was exploded. The National Agency on Protection of Cultural Heritage issued a decree which permitted RMG Gold (the company which was in charge of conducting mining works in Sandris) to resume work. In a statement, the company referred to the decree and stated that the decision was based on the fact that part of the site was fully researched by archaeologists and the rest of the area wasn't possible to research due to the threat of collapse. Furthermore, according to the representatives of RMG Gold, international scientists had concluded that there was not likely to be found any more artifacts there.

This decision caused great resentment among Georgian population. Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia and the spiritual leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church Illia II scolded the government for having allowed it to happen (Staff, 2015).

Protests against the construction of mestiachala and namakhvani hydro power plants

Another cultural and environmental challenge faced by the Georgian society was concerning the dispute over Metiachala Hydro Power Plant Construction, when on March of 2018 local population from the town of upper Svaneti - Mestia, started protests against the construction of Mestiachala

Hydro Power Plant (HPP), claiming that it would destroy unique nature and historical heritage of Svaneti.

In the center of Mestia, local population blocked the road to the heavy equipment directing to the Mestiachala HPP. Despite the fact that the local police was mobilized on the territory, protesters were not going to leave until the construction equipment leaved the area (Khutsishvili, 2018).

Later on, representatives from the Interior Minister of Georgia arrived in Mestia to negotiate with the protesters, however, the sides could not reach any agreement, as the authorities were not going to suspend the construction of the HPP. Svaneti residents had been protesting against the construction of HPPs for several months.

Local population of Svaneti region developed a common petition and started collecting signatures in all local communities. According to the petition, protesters prohibited all kinds of infrastructural projects, which could damage beautiful and unique nature of Svaneti. In addition, they prohibited construction of hydroelectric power plants and gold production, as it would harm material and non-material cultural and natural heritage of Svaneti, and they were strongly opposing the implementation of other planned HPP projects: Nenskra, Mestiachala, Khudon and around 50 HPP's in Zemo Svaneti (Khutsishvili, 2018).

Similar dispute against the construction of the new Power Plant occurred in March of 2021, in the Western Georgia, when the protesters of the city of Kutaisi hosted a massive rally against the construction of the Namakhvani HPP dam over the Rioni River basin in the Imereti and Lechkhumi provinces.

A public movement with the slogan "Save the Rioni Gorge" was protesting the construction of HPP. Protesters argued, that the geological factors, including potentially disastrous seismic and landslide risk had not been adequately researched and had been transferred from residents without their consent (Beraia, 2021).

Protesters decided to launch a dispute against the construction of Namakhvani HPP. Afterwards, the final decision will be made regarding the construction of HPP.

The battle over the Dakota access pipeline

Protests concerning the Dakota Access Pipeline started in April of 2016, which became a huge story, as this fight encompassed everything from the U.S. federal government's historically appealing treatment of Native Americans to broader debates about the climate change (Plumer, 2016). Protesters, including tribes, activists and environmentalists, started camping out in North Dakota and argued that pipeline would run through a sacred burial ground and could pollute nearby rivers (Cullen, 2016).

The issue gained national attention; environmental activists argued that the pipeline would contribute man-made climate change by building up the country's oil infrastructure. They believed that fossil fuels needed to be kept in the ground to protect the world from the worst effects of climate change. On the contrary, proponents noted, that in case if the construction of Dakota Pipeline was suspended, oil producers would ship the oil by rail line, as much of the oil produced in North Dakota already was, and argument that was also used in favor of the pipeline.

As the representatives of Standing Rock Sioux Tribe emphasized, the Dakota Access Pipeline violated Article II of the Fort Laramie Treaty, which guaranteed the "undisturbed use and occupation" of reservation lands surrounding the proposed location of the pipeline. In 2015 the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (operating as a sovereign nation) passed a resolution regarding the pipeline and discussed the risks that the Dakota pipeline would pose for the reservation and how it could destroy cultural resources (Cullen, 2016).

As the construction of the pipeline started during the presidency of Barack Obama, his administration tackled this issue carefully and the decision was made to stop the process of the construction until the environmental review.

However, in January of 2017, 45th President of the U.S. Donald Trump was elected, who intended to continue the implementation of Dakota Access project, as well as the Keystone oil pipeline in order to spark a democratic 'energy revolution' and signed an executive order to continue the process of construction (White, 2018).

In February of 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a bid led by Dakota Access oil pipeline operator Energy Transfer to avoid additional environmental review of a section that runs under an artificial lake (Hurley, 2022).

The justices left in place a lower court's decision that ordered the federal government to undertake a more intensive environmental study of the pipeline's route underneath Lake Oahe, which straddles the border of North Dakota and South Dakota.

Analysis of the conducted interview

On June of 2023 an interview was conducted with the American professor Lo Bello Maya Jean, who traces Indian ancestry and is the specialist of the Native American issues. To my question: How does the Dakota Access Pipeline affect the environment/ecology? she replied, "the Dakota Access Pipeline affects the quality of drinking water for the nearby Standing Rock Reservation. This is what the indigenous activists state and was the main reason why the protest began. Since they were able to convince the Obama Administration to rescind the DAP (Dakota Access Pipeline), I take this as a sign that their worries were justified—the government isn't likely to go back on something this financially important, unless a lot of proof is offered. As I recall, during his campaign Trump already stated that he would reinstate the DAP upon winning the presidency."

As Lo Bello emphasized, the issue of drinking water is naturally important to everyone, but for the indigenous peoples, it carried religious and cultural significance as well. She mentioned the role played by people who emerged as Water Keepers in the protest. A Keeper is someone who is entrusted with or feels responsible for protecting a resource. Access to drinking water is a large issue for other reservations, such as the Navajo. As a region, the West is dry and water is always an issue because there is simply not enough. Historically, water rights have been an incendiary issue in the West (the US region of the West). If examining this topic from the broader perspective of minority rights, the past few years have been filled with the very upsetting news of lead contamination in the drinking water in Flint, Michigan, a city that is predominantly impoverished and full of African Americans. As Prof. Lo Bello noted, the example of Flint and all the ways the government mishandled this case and did nothing to change the situation, until people were becoming seriously ill, inspired indigenous environmental activists even more.

As for the question: What are the potential risks of the pipeline construction for the indigenous nations in the U.S.? Prof. Lo Bello noted, “other than the environmental and cultural risks listed above, the great risk of the pipeline is that the success of indigenous groups demonstrates how capable they are of maintaining/claiming their sovereignty and rights. I emphasize the word sovereignty because reservations have a relative level of autonomy and sovereignty on paper, but the government historically tends to ignore this, which means, that their land is always in danger and they always face the threat of having their homes taken away, either in one form or another”. In the past, reservations have had little success in doing so. Things are changing bit by bit, but slowly, and the above-mentioned case shows how these decisions go back and forth as the government can’t decide between supporting indigenous rights, or the loud claims of the mainstream, mainly white society that surrounds the reservations. The neighbor of reservations generally greatly resent the reservations; they feel that reservation residents have a “free ride” and don’t have to work and have too many rights already, and an issue like this makes a lot of hard feelings flare up”.

As the professor discussed during the interview, countless cases like these happened in the past and a really impressive thing about Standing Rock is that it got an enormous amount of media coverage, lasted a long time, and generated a lot of support from the outside sources. It really turned the tables in a way and made it obvious that indigenous rights are also human rights and environmental rights and as such, a concern for us all. Standing Rock represents a great moral example and it is quite a turning point compared to how this sort of a situation would have turned out in the past.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the issues discussed in the article, we can assume that the unique cultural heritage of populations and living environment should not be endangered. Pollution risks create challenging political, economic and social circumstances for the government to address. Eliminating such inequalities are difficult to be fully accomplished, however when governments are concerned and thoughtful about these problems, it becomes more realistic to further environmental protection for everybody.

This problem requires an important attention and carefully planned problem-solving agenda to achieve environmental justice, implement and enforce environmental laws to protect everyone.

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